BISHOP GROSSETESTE UNIVERSITY

Lawrence, C. (2018). Don't panic: it's only a neurodevelopmental difference! *SEN Magazine*, 95, July/August.

Don’t panic, it’s only a neurodevelopmental difference!

The remedy for autism’s seeming invisibility in our schools may be simpler than we think, writes ***Clare Lawrence***

There’s nothing “odd” about having autism.

It is a little unusual, in that only about one per cent of pupils is autistic, but that is OK. It’s about half as many (according to my favourite search engine) as have green eyes (two per cent), a little fewer than have red hair (one to two per cent) and about the same as the population over 15 who are vegan (one per cent).

Like each of these groups, it is a little special, in that it is not the norm. We identify vegan restaurants where we don’t bother to label ones that serve meat. Similarly, we recognise the educational needs of pupils with autism as “special” which, again according to my search engine, means “better, greater, or otherwise different from what is usual”.

So, autism is different from what is usual, but it should nonetheless be familiar. Estimating personal network size is a complicated business (for example, McCormick, Salganik and Zheng, 2010), but even conservative estimates on the amount of people the average person “knows” put it at over 400. Statistically, then – even if this is an unscientific way of approaching this – we should all know some people who are autistic as part of our “personal networks”.

Yet this doesn’t seem to be the case. Recently, I asked a group of some 80+ second year undergraduates to self-categorise themselves as either “knowing” or “not knowing” someone with autism. Worryingly, 64 per cent of the students self-identified as “not knowing”.

An unseen condition

It seems we are continuing to hide autism away. There are plenty of blogs dedicated to the question of whether it is helpful to “come out” as autistic, and I have had many conversations with parents who resist seeking a diagnosis for their child because of a fear of “labelling”. It seems that we fear to identify, or to have our children identified, as being part of a group that is perceived as different.

Yet although they are a minority, people with autism are also ordinary – almost as ordinary as people with red hair. Autism is one way of being a human being and is a way of being so which is certainly normal to that person. We need, I believe, to take a close look at our positioning of autism as “other”.

Perhaps we could work to establish a societal attitude where having autism is both visible and accepted, starting with our attitude in schools. Once upon a time, having a neurodevelopmental difference that meant that you favoured the use of your left hand over your right meant that you were condemned as “sinister”. Strenuous efforts were made to correct your impairment. Now, being left-handed is so accepted as to be invisible; you do not have to declare it as a special need and it is seldom used as the primary identifier for a person.

Yet with the acceptance of this particular neurodevelopmental difference has come a lack of support for pupils with it in schools. In classroom seating plans, positioning of left-handed pupils so that shared table space with right-handed peers is managed effectively is seldom considered, and we know that being taught handwriting by a right-handed teacher can have a serious impact on left-handed pupils’ progress.

The answer, of course, is both greater awareness and a lessening of what might be described as Great British embarrassment. “Erin, you’re left handed so you might find it easier if you swap with Rohan and sit where there’s more space” is unlikely to be a phrase to send anyone into a spin, yet the same sort of relaxed accommodation of need for a pupil with autism is seen as far more problematic. “Rohan, you’re autistic so you might find it easier if you swap with Erin and sit where there’s more space” is somehow seen as a less inclusive and less acceptable remark.

Familiarity breeds understanding

The answer to the problem of left-handed learners being taught handwriting by a right-handed teacher seems to me to be obvious: use positive selection to ensure the presence of a teaching assistant (TA) who is left-handed. This gives that assistant the neuro-similarity with the minority learners in that class that is necessary to accommodate their different need. So, is this something that could be adapted for inclusion regarding autism? Could or should we actively recruit TAs with autism to support our children? Or, taking this idea further, could we not ensure that a fair percentage (at least one per cent minimum according to the population) of our teachers are autistic and are open about the fact, in which case they could be supported by a non-autistic TA?

The "mere-exposure effect" (Zajonc, 1968) suggests that familiarity with an object will tend to increase a subject's preference for that object. This theory has been used to explore racial prejudice (Zebrowitz, White and Wieneke, 2008), attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities (Li and Wang, 2013; Rillotta, 2007) and peer attitudes on first meeting with adults with autism (Sasson and Morrison, 2017). Each of these studies suggests that exposure to members of the targeted group may result in a positive response from the participants. Perhaps it really is as simple as that. We tie ourselves in knots about how we can better meet the needs of the autistic pupils in our class when at least one answer is there to be had. It seems that one of the best ways for teachers to better understand the needs of pupils with autism in their classes might be simply to get out there and get to know more autistic people.

Further information

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PULL OUTS

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